

Draft Board Letter To Mayor On Parks Public Involvement Policy, 10/17/06

Dear Mayor Nickels:

This is to respond to your March 9, 2006 letter asking the Board of Park Commissioners to review Parks and Recreation's public involvement policy and practices.

The Board has conducted a review, and we recommend some changes to the current policy. We interviewed the parks and recreation departments of four cities (Baltimore, Denver, Portland, and Vancouver, B.C.). We learned that:

- Denver Parks has no public involvement policy, but a few miscellaneous related policies; they like our policy and want to borrow from it.
- Vancouver Parks has public involvement practices, but no formal guiding policy. They will borrow our web format for "project" pages.
- Baltimore Parks has no public involvement policy. They have an Office of Partnerships created in 2003 that works with community groups to forge public/private agreements to raise funds for small projects (benches, monthly cleanups, extra maintenance).
- Portland Parks has a public involvement policy that includes only general guidelines for creating an individual public involvement plan for each project.

We recognize the frustration expressed by some Seattle citizens, and we believe some of that frustration stems from the fact that there is often a long lag between the time when a project is identified in a plan adopted after a public process, and the time when the project is funded and the design process begins. Clearly, planning processes are somewhat abstract and do not draw the same intensity of interest as do sited projects in which perceived impacts can suddenly become evident.

We would point out up front that most of the projects that caused an outcry early this year were projects that underwent hefty public processes and received support from your office and official approval by the City Council, or projects on which community sentiment prevailed: the Zoo garage, in which critics claim the City did not listen; the Occidental Park project, in which criticism came only for the removal of trees; the skatepark at Woodland Park, in which the community's wishes prevailed; and the Capehart Housing issue, on which your office stepped up and found a solution.

In some of these cases, the claim of project opponents is that Parks conducts empty processes and does not listen. In others, project opponents have accused Parks of "pitting one group against another." We do not believe this is true, but that sometimes user groups and neighbors, or groups within a neighborhood, simply disagree. Parks and the Board face a constant challenge in striking the right balance between the need for active recreation and the need for quiet open space. We have tried, in the revised public involvement policy, to address the issue of how Parks uses the information it receives from the public, and how to convey that clearly to the public.

Each member of the Board of Park Commissioners spends an average of five hours per month in active public meetings, listening to Parks staff and the public. Each of us spends several hours in preparation for each meeting, often visiting sites and reading as many as 6,000 e-mails in a year. In addition, each of us serves on various other committees: in my case, our Board planning group, your Restore Our Waters group, and the Seattle Art Museum Board. We have also spent considerable time conducting our review of the Public Involvement Policy and making recommendations on how it can be improved. In short, I do not think the Board can be responsible for significant additional volunteer contributions of time.

During our review we heard from several people that they want public review to take place earlier in the “life” of the project. This begs the question, “when does a project or proposal become a project or proposal?” Some believe that detailed, intensive public processes should take place during planning processes. For example, Parks endeavors to update its comprehensive plan every five or six years. The plan is broad and all-encompassing of Parks’ functions, and provides a standard (in the form of distribution guidelines) for identifying park improvements needed to meet demand and to achieve equitable geographic distribution. Parks seeks funding from various fund sources for projects that it deems, through criteria approved by you and the City Council, to be high priorities. For a plan of this scope that encompasses the entire park and recreation system, individual notification would not be feasible, but paid newspaper ads might help.

Another example is the Joint Athletic Facilities Development Plan (JAFDP), which the City Council adopted by resolution in 1997. Parks reopened it for more public input and the Council adopted it again in 2002. It identified a number of ballfields that, to increase capacity and playability without building new ones, should be upgraded with such improvements as lighting and artificial turf. The citizen committee that crafted the project list for the Pro Parks Levy chose some projects, notably Loyal Heights Playfield, that had been identified in the JAFDP.

The Park Board held approximately six hours of public hearings on this project and heard from about 200 people in person about the JAFDP. The error that led to the misunderstanding about Loyal Heights was the language used in the Pro Parks Levy to describe the project: it read “Upgrade and improve play surfaces and field amenities,” and made no mention of FieldTurf. At the first public meeting, it was unclear to the people from the neighborhood that the type of turf to be installed at the field was not an issue for public input.

While we do not believe we can solve this dilemma completely, we do recommend changes in Parks’ Public Involvement Policy that identify and describe public involvement and outreach efforts that should take place for the planning processes that become the source of projects when funding is secured (the current policy addresses only funded capital projects and other proposals that would change the look or use of a park). We hope, too, to shed some light on other actions that might enhance Parks’ public involvement efforts. A \$ sign means that implementing the recommendation has a cost.

Policy amendments we recommend (“\$” indicates that there is a cost) focus on:

- Adding a section that addresses outreach and public process for Parks planning efforts, which include the comprehensive plan, area park plans, park master plans, and new facility siting efforts such as the two now underway to site an off-leash area in Queen Anne or Magnolia and to identify skatepark sites around the city. \$
- Casting a wide net for people and groups who may be interested in a plan, proposal, or project.
- Identifying the possibility of hiring outside facilitators for meetings that might be contentious. \$
- Presenting at the beginning of every public meeting background information about the project, how decisions are made, what planning process identified the project, where its funding came from, what the constraints may be on public input, at what points public input is invited, the process to date, a reminder that comments in any form bear equal weight with attendance at a meeting, and a summary of the outreach conducted for the current meeting. This can be easily accomplished with the use of a template.

The Board also discussed issues raised during our review that do not fit neatly into the policy itself, but that called for consideration and recommendations.

1. We recommend that Parks staff (representing both operations and capital projects) visit the City Neighborhood Council once or twice a year to identify upcoming parks and recreation issues. To that end, we recommend that Parks obtain from DON the citizen e-mail list for each district. \$
2. We recommend that Parks learn routinely from the Department of Neighborhoods what demonstration of community outreach and consensus they have received for each successful park-related Neighborhood Matching Fund application.
3. We recommend that you pursue the idea of a half-page ad in the Seattle Times and/or PI every week, announcing upcoming City meetings and events. Other cities, including Fort Worth, TX and Tallahassee, FL, buy these ads. \$
4. We recommend that the City’s planning staff initiate with the City Neighborhood Council a discussion of the “shelf life” of the 38 neighborhood plans adopted in 1998 and 1999. They have so far served as legitimate sources of projects with community support that Parks and other departments try to get funding for. Questions have arisen about how long they are valid and relevant.
5. We recommend that Parks analyze the revenue impacts of providing free meeting space at its facilities to neighborhood organizations, and make a

recommendation to the Board on whether to waive room reservation fees, as community members have asked.

6. In order to provide webcasts of Board of Park Commissioners meetings, the Board will try holding a meeting at the City Hall Boards and Commissions Room, and we recommend that Parks staff get cost estimates for bringing Seattle Channel staff to the Parks Administration for 24 meetings each year and for retrofitting the Park Board Room for such webcasts.
7. We would like to hold a discussion with you and the Parks Superintendent of how and by whom Project Advisory Team members are chosen, and what weight their work carries, as has been suggested by a number of community members.
8. The Board will clarify methods for getting items on our agenda: by request from a community organization, by request from the Parks Superintendent, by request from a Board member; and through an agenda planning process that involves the Park Board Chair, the Parks Superintendent, and the Parks staff person assigned to oversee Board agendas. In this way, issues relating to park policy or practice, in addition to those relating to capital project, can easily reach our agenda.
9. There was a request that, in cases where there is an appointed Project Advisory Team, the chair of that group chair and facilitate public meetings relating to the project. We recommend against this, because PAT members are volunteers who are not necessarily skilled in meeting facilitation or knowledgeable about Parks issues.
10. We recommend against calling for a written transcript of every public meeting, as the staffing costs would be prohibitive.
11. We recommend against a requirement to post signs in a park six weeks before a public meeting (the current requirement is that signs be posted four weeks after the Project Steering Committee approves the public involvement plan; this gives Parks staff time to have the sign fabricated and installed and three weeks before a public meeting). We believe three weeks is sufficient.
12. We recommend against a request to notify park neighbors within 1,500 feet of a park boundary. 300 feet is the standard used by the City for rezones, and we believe that in combination with all the other notification methods, it is adequate, particularly because the “unit” of U.S. Postal Service delivery is a carrier route, and most carrier routes extend well beyond 300 feet from a park edge.

By copy of this letter and our changes to the public involvement policy, we intend to share these recommendations with the City Auditor and Councilmember Della, so that

the audit staff can incorporate them into their process and findings, and to ask the Parks Superintendent to implement the recommendations immediately.

Sincerely,

Kate Pflaumer, Chair
Seattle Board of Park Commissioners

Attachment: Parks Public Involvement Policy, showing changes

cc: Ken Bounds, Superintendent, Seattle Parks and Recreation
David Della, Member, Seattle City Council
Claudia Gross-Shader, Office of City Auditor